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Moving Forward in P-3 Aligmemnt: Building Bridges in Public-Private Partnerships

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MOVING FORWARD IN P-3 ALIGNMENT:
BUILDING BRIDGES IN PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

A Project Report

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

Master Teacher

by

Rachell Maza Foster

June 2012

ABSTRACT

MOVING FORWARD IN P-3 ALIGNMENT:
BUILDING BRIDGES IN PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

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Reauthorization of the Head Start Act in 2007 called for new standards of quality education and evidenced-based practices for gathering child outcomes and assessment data. Furthermore, the act stipulates partnerships between public education K-12 and preschools; a relationship that traditionally held its distance due to age eligibility. With the recent acquisition of the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant, Washington state is now recognized for its leadership in this field. This paper will take into consideration these efforts and further explore options for creating seamless transitions for children and families as they enter the public school system. This project will provide recommendations for schools and private agencies in moving towards an aligned approach to education, in the format of a guidebook written for facilitators. The development of the handbook is specific to school districts or programs seeking to launch focus groups around the goal of a collaborative approach to alignment in the early grades.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

Local and state initiatives in Washington, have worked in creating specific developmental benchmarks pertaining to the ages preceding kindergarten resulting in the finalization of the Early Learning Guidelines in 2012. This growing trend towards the significance of quality early learning programs magnifies years of research and confirms the presence of preschool at the table of education reform.

Investments in early education produces both long term and short term economic benefits as stated by Calman and Tarr-Whelan in a recommendations report written in response to a conference held at MIT in 2005. Of the short-term benefits stated, are a more efficient work force due to the care provided for working mothers, and the purchase of goods and services. Also stated in the report were long-term benefits of quality early education building an employable and educated work force. In addition, accruing research over the past 40 years has proven the benefits of quality early learning education to have a significant impact on the US economy. Three major long-term follow-up studies support the advantages of early education. These are Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores,2005) based in Michigan, the Carolina Abecedarian project (Muennig, Robertson, Johnson, Campbell, Pungello, & Neidell, 2011) and the Chicago Parent Centers (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, and Mann, 2001) based in Illinois. Cumulatively spanning four decades of research and follow-up analyses, these programs evidence an economic return of up to \$13 to every \$1 invested

in early education. Noteworthy gains were attributable to savings in the reduction of incarceration, reduced remedial services in school, higher graduation rates, increased attendance to higher education, and higher salaries (Muennig et al, 2011) . The ideas that children who participate in high-quality supportive preschool environments are less likely to require remedial attention throughout schooling, less likely to be involved in criminal activity, and are more likely to contribute to a higher percentage of tax payments due to salary increases, are at the crux of these studies. These trends, resulting from extensive longitudinal gathering of data, have influenced the development and established the need for high quality early education.

Three studies are often cited in support of quality early learning programs. Chicago's Parent Centers (CPC) included a total of 1539 children of whom the intervention group received school-based early education as well as comprehensive family services from preschool until third grade (Reynolds et al. 2001). The comparison groups were randomly selected from all day kindergartens, with a portion receiving the CPC programming without the initial preschool experience. The most current follow-up on participants reports data at age 24. Results from Reynolds et al. show that children who had received the preschool intervention had lower rates of felony arrests of 16.5%, as compared to 21.1%. The treatment group are also shown by the researchers to be more likely to have had a stable employment history or to have attended higher education by age 24. Mental health benefits were also reported to be in favor of those who participated in the entire preschool treatment (Reynolds et al 2001).

The Abecedarian study (ABC), conducted in North Carolina, enrolled infants at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute between the years of 1972 and

1977. ABC randomized 111 infants to receive either an intensive early education program or nutritional supplements and parental counseling alone. Results indicated that not only had the treatment group previously found to have improved cognition and education attainment, but Muenning et al. concluded that early education programs may actually improve health and reduce the amount of risky health behaviors in adulthood.

The only other randomized study to include specific interventions in early childhood education was the data that came from the Perry Preschool Program (Muenning et al, 2011). The Perry Preschool Project was a study held in Ypsilanti, Michigan on children born between the years of 1958 and 1962. A cost benefit analyses conducted by Steve Barnett in 1985, revealed that the program actually implied a positive social benefit in that tax payers reaped the most economic benefit. Barnett explains the study project to include 123 children selected based on low parental education, and split into an experimental group to which participating children were exposed to the preschool program, and a control group who did not receive any. The concluding benefit-cost analyses estimated differences in seven categories between the two groups by age 19, all of which indicated positive gains for the treatment group (Barnett, 1985). These categories are child care, elementary and secondary education, delinquency and crime, immediate program costs, earnings and employment, and welfare.

As the research indicates from the Abecedarian, High Scope/Perry, and Chicago Parent Center studies, solid and aligned educational experiences in the early years have significant impact on the lifetime achievements of participants.

Statement of the Problem

While the decisions over budget cuts and reductions in public spending carry on,

early learning continues to oscillate amidst the ebb and flow of public debate and research. Efforts from local, state, and federal agencies are being called upon to establish comprehensive systems that diminish the possibility of students falling behind; furthermore, the earliest years are being recognized as the cornerstone for these effective systems (Education Commission of the States, 2010).

Given these findings, the urgency to focus public awareness and funds into quality early learning resources is apparent. Missed opportunities in the first five years of life, for those children who are at risk, result in schools expending large amounts of energy to make up what learning could have taken place during these first critical years. Children, when making transitions into school, are very vulnerable to high levels of stress due to discontinuities in environments (Howard, 2010). A strong system of alignment from preschool to the early elementary grades has the potential to alleviate this gap (Kaurez, 2006). Furthermore, the importance of maintaining the gains made in early education programs must be sustained through high quality kindergarten through 3rd grade experiences; the interest in creating alignment in the early years to close achievement gaps is a growing trend (Kaurez & Thorman, 2011). How can transitions into kindergarten and through the early grades be improved by breaking down existing barriers that hinder collaboration between the early learning community and the school district?

Purpose of the Project

Traditional operation, in the style of separated silos between the primary grades, reinforces fragmented educational experiences. Ensuring a solid start to school which encompasses all domains of development: social-emotional, physical, cognitive,

language, and literacy, paired with a strong aligned system of grade-level expectations and curricula, will promote the success of a solid foundation by which students will build their capacity to achieve (Howard, 2010). This type of interaction calls for close coordination as well as requires policymakers and practitioners to find ways for bridging the disconnect that has persisted between school readiness and school improvement (Howard, 2010). The purpose of this project is to seek out a vehicle through which educators from preschool through third grade can communicate and align practices. What this calls for is communication among the early grades up through 3rd, to include the field of early learning professionals when seeking to improve student outcomes.

Significance of the Project

Long-term benefits of quality early learning programs include lower costs for remedial and special education, better job preparedness, lower criminal justice costs, promote higher incomes, and lessen welfare payments (Calman & Tar-Whelan, 2005). With such significant consequences from early education an important question to ask is, "What kinds of programs have been making the most impact on student success?"

Long-standing programs such as Head Start, have led the way in carrying out its mission to reach children and families before entering kindergarten. Furthermore, Head Start, which served 1,117,186 children and pregnant women in 2009-2010 (National Head Start Association), is required to collaborate with schools at the state level according the recent Improving Head Start for School Readiness Reauthorization Act (2007). The idea of consistent alignment through these early grades may carry an even more compelling argument when considering the impact on student outcomes by the end of third grade.

A report using a data base of nearly 4,000 students, tracked reading progress until age 19 (Hernandez, 2011). Linking high school graduation rates to children at different reading skill levels, Hernandez indicates that students who were not reading proficiently by the 3rd grade were four times more likely not to graduate. Even more troubling are the findings in his research regarding students who were unable to master just the very basic skills by the end of 3rd grade, were almost six times greater likely not to graduate. From this research an essential factor of success in school can be predicted by a student's ability in reading. How can we assure that students are being promoted through the early grades in a fashion that will give them the best opportunity for acquiring basic reading skills, at the very least? An approach in aligning researched based practices throughout the early grades to also include preschool, can strengthen the opportunities for students to achieve these reading scores.

Facilitating partnerships between preschool teachers and K-3rd grade teachers is one way in creating vertical communication through the early grades. Developing a culture of collaboration through focused meetings, is the intention of this project. Included in this project will be a detailed guide written for use by principals or designated facilitators. The guide book will include suggested partners as recommended by Washington State's Department of Early Learning, a power point presentation, and meeting agendas. Prospective participants will be preschool teachers, daycare providers, Kindergarten through 3rd grade teachers, and if available family resource coordinators (FRC).

Limitations of the Project

Preschool education, because it is not mandated by the government, finds itself in

various forms such as home-care providers, private programs, as well as some attached to public education; this presents an issue of consistency and program accountability. Because of this widely spread arena of implementation in various settings, documents such as the Early Learning Guidelines, are imperative in ensuring program quality. Further development is needed in this area to continue forward in forging professional relationships between educators in the preschool arena and school districts a reality. While this project is focused on targeting grass roots collaboration in the state of Washington, it does not address the means for which to provide funding needed for implementation.

Necessary planning for program sustainability through innovative funding options, such as flexible use of Title I funds and braiding other public and private sources, must be in the hands of leaders with astute financial competence to secure the longevity of programs.

Definition of Terms

The following list of definitions and terms is provided as a resource for the subsequent chapter, as subject matter pertains to ideas related to educational philosophies and historical background for the development of early learning education.

Alignment refers to the continuous interrelated nature of education programs and practices across early learning and the early grades (Education Commission of the States, 2010).

Child-centered denotes an approach to education encompassing the individual interests of each student in producing learning (Dunn, 2010).

Developmentalism Refers to the belief that teaching based on the developmental

stages of the child is the most effective. It is sometimes used synonymously with terms such as *developmentally appropriate practice* and *constructivism*. (Dunn, 2010 p 156).

Equality of opportunity means that each person is given (through the institution of public education) an equal chance to pursue wealth and social status. This concept of determining social class is based on the belief that every person must begin the race to wealth on the same level. Ideally social status can be attained by anyone irregardless of family wealth, heredity, or some other special cultural advantage. One can argue that a persons' social status and wealth are a product of their own choices. Equality of opportunity shifts the responsibility of wealth to the shoulders of the individual rather than external social factors. (Spring, J. 2010)

Horizontal alignment highlights the inter-connectedness and consistency between standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, among a single grade level (Education Commission of the States, 2010).

Progressivism as an educational theory is related to the philosophy of pragmatism. Proponents of progressivism favor a flexible curriculum that changes to meet the changing needs of individuals and society (Dunn, 2010 p221).

School Readiness as defined by the National Goals Panel in a report that defined school readiness as having three parts: the child's readiness, the schools readiness, and the supports available in the community. (Washington Alliance for Better Schools, 2005).

Social and cultural capital refers to the economic value of a person's behaviors, attitudes, knowledge, and cultural experiences (Spring, J. 2010)

Transition refers to the totality of experiences and opportunities a child encounters in moving from one program or setting to another (Education Commission of

the States, 2010)

Vertical alignment highlights the continuous and progressive nature of learning and development. The skills and knowledge gained in one year do not serve as an end point rather as a foundational element upon which to build from (ECS, 2010).

Project Overview

Chapter one has provided an overview of the focus for this project. Detailed research supporting alignment in the early grades to include preschool through grade three along with philosophical underpinnings, historical background, and consideration to multicultural principles, provide the content in chapter two. Chapter three reports on existing partnerships and program models in the state of Washington between public and private entities which will then serve as a basis for the tool referenced in the appendix. Chapter four briefly describes the guidebook for facilitating focus groups, whose main objective is alignment of practices in preK-3rd grade. The final chapter provides recommendations and guidance in using the guidebook to fit the needs of differing communities, as well as future recommendations for continuing research and project development.

CHAPTER II

A Brief History on the Birth of Head Start

Part of the federal movement in establishing a quality educative experience in the younger years, dates back to the mid 60's during president Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. As declared in his State of the Union Address, "Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national organization and support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the State and the local level and must be supported and directed by State and local efforts" (Johnson, 1964) He also goes on to address the importance of civic responsibility to provide an equal chance at attaining success.

According to John T. Dailey (1964) new research at that time indicated the effects of poverty and its impact on education. Dailey conducted a follow-up study in 1964, on a national talent survey that suggested educational achievement was essential for emergence from poverty. The idea that students who did well in school were more likely to enter college spurred the government to carry-on with its plan to solve the problem of poverty. Not long after, a panel of experts quickly assembled to develop a comprehensive child development program that would meet the needs of disadvantaged preschool children. Thus was the birth of Head Start. It was designed to help break the cycle of poverty by providing services to low-income families who would benefit from support for emotional, social, health, and nutritional needs (Zigler, Gordic, & Styfco, 2007).

Throughout the nation a surprising number of states have invested heavily into the field of early learning, and specifically preschool programs. This shift in allocation of funding is a result of years of culminating research indicating that the impact of quality

educational experiences before entering kindergarten are essential in determining the success of a child in school and beyond (Barnett, 2002).

Educational Foundations in American History

In working out the purposes of education and its provision to society, the ideas of equality and opportunity are commonly referenced. A quick look into American history easily magnifies these ideas as staples in the formation of the U.S's principles, standards, and morals. Of the most well-known foundational documents is the American Declaration of Independence, of which sought to promote equality in a society saturated by inequality. The government's attempt to balance the opportunity for all within this document, although earnest, still lacked provision for large portions of society at that time. For example, "All men are created equal" (p. 31) during this point in history referred to only white men, whilst turning away women's rights, slavery, legal racial segregation, and the exploitation of Native Americans (Spring, 2010). Public education became a possibility for leveling societal inequality.

These ideas originate in the 1830's with Horace Mann's declaration that schools are the great balance wheel of society by providing graduates with equality of opportunity to pursue wealth (Spring, 2010, p. 31). In his book, *American Education*, Joel Spring brings attention to the definition of equality in this type of context. He writes that "Equality does not mean that everyone will have equal incomes and equal status" (Spring, 2010). Rather from the reading, the distinction is made by the provision which education allows in serving as a vehicle for the opportunity to attain affluence. "By going to school, everyone was to be given an equal opportunity to compete for jobs and wealth" (Spring, 2010, p. 19). To better understand the nation's climate at this point in

history, an understanding of society and immigration will help clarify how public schools transformed into this “great balance wheel of society”.

During the time period of 1890-1930, 22 million immigrants crowded into New York City schools. According to a film entitled, “School the Story of American Public Education” (Patton, 2001) many of these immigrants from all over Europe, came to the country in hopes to enroll their children into the public education system. These people placed their hopes in an opportunity for their children to succeed in life through formal schooling. While many of these children were used in the labor force, only about half of the population of children attended school, with the average years of schooling being five (Patton, 2001). In response to the massive amounts of children in the labor force, “progressive” schools were made popular incorporating work, school, and play.

The term “progressive” in the field of education is an approach rooted in the idea of bringing the learner into an “active relationship with the subject matter” (Noll, 2010). One such school incorporating this idea was the Emerson School in Gary, Indiana. The basic premise of this model of schooling innovatively blended education with community.

Gary school programs provided a rich experience, rounding out the core subjects with art/nature classes, animal husbandry, auto-mechanics, as well as requiring students to help manage and care for the building itself (Patton, 2001). It is also noteworthy that this school gained world-wide attention from such countries as Japan (Patton, 2001). There is value to be had in teaching children and adolescents the importance of responsibility in daily living. Not only did the Gary school incorporate this type of student expectation, but the film noted that these schools also included opportunities for

the community and families to participate in furthering their own education. Evening and weekend programs were offered to assist families, as many of them came to the US without an education. The Gary school approach to education required a hands-on approach which allowed students to interact with their environment and pursue their interests (Patton, 2001). Early childhood education is still very much hands on “learning by doing”. Various approaches have been developed over the past two centuries that influenced the philosophies seen in preschool classrooms.

The Origins of a Child-Centered Curriculum

John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), who was a Czech philosopher and pedagogue thought of the practicality of education and it’s application in the everyday (Dunn, 2005). Comenius influence is evident in the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who may be the most well-known figure behind the developmentalist intellects.

Developmentalism, the belief that teaching based on developmental stages, came from the combined philosophies of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel , and ultimately John Dewey of whom will be discussed in further detail later. These intellectuals challenged the appropriateness of traditional scholastics, an elitist view of education reserved only for men of status. With a child-centered curriculum focusing on the students’ ability to actively participate on learning, these philosophers paved the way for a focus on the individual. These men challenged traditional views of schooling, each contributing to the idea that the capabilities within children to construct their learning, is immense.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi who lived in the early 19th century believed that, “any attempts at education that went against the nature of the child were counterproductive (Dunn, 2005, p. 162).” Pestalozzi developed a method of encouraging the learning of

children by intentionally creating a sensory rich experience, through the manipulation of the environment, in correspondence to the child's natural developmental stage. He believed that children required an age-appropriate environment that provided opportunities for proper development. He also strongly supported the idea of logical consequences and the importance of parental approval. Dunn points out an idea common in Pestalozzi's work that, "the child is more likely to learn a lesson by losing the approval of someone he or she loves rather than from fear of punishment (p. 164). This line of thought can be directly translated into the importance of the home and school connection. The lack of such a relationship does not adequately support developmentally appropriate practices within the school setting. Thus programs advocating for the vertical alignment of grades preschool through 3rd grade, must include the family component to support transitional concerns.

Child Centered Philosophies Further Refined and Developed

Approaches in regarding how children learn and develop continued to improve and gain repertoire, as developed by a succession of thinkers. Throughout the history of education, traditional scholastics were being challenged by prominent thinkers and intellectuals of their day, and slowly gravitated toward the ideas of individualism and naturalism (Dunn, 2005). Renaissance humanist thinkers began etching the beginnings of a whole-child approach, being concerned with issues of ethics rather than questions of logic, that had dominated the previous Medieval era (Dunn, 2005). Their ideas moved away from the scholastics of the Middle Ages and continually delved into the subjects such as poetry, art, imagination, and emotions. The result of these precepts, building one

onto another, continually formed into what is widely accepted in most educational settings today. The idea that children have the ability to participate in their learning, rather than a pupil to be filled with knowledge, dates back to the period of time between the 15th-18th Century referred to as the Early Modern Period (Dunn, 2005).

The well-known philosopher John Lock encompassed a range of views that support the child-centered curriculum, during the late 1600's. As Dunn (2005) writes,

His influence falls somewhere between those who viewed children as inherently evil and in need of a curriculum that stressed strong discipline... and those who saw the importance of enhancing the child's natural tendencies...based on children's needs and interest (p. 144).

A modern example of this foundational education theory is evident in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, a federal law ensuring that students with disabilities are served with specialized instruction birth through age 18 or 21. More recently in 2004 IDEA was reinstated to include the following purpose,

...to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living (IDEA 2004).

According to Dunn (2005), Locke and his contemporaries, Rene Decartes, and Francis Bacon sought to understand how humans acquire knowledge and understanding. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) continued this thought by exploring the idea that

knowledge is built from simple to complex and that the planning of education through the ages and stages of children's development, should reflect this type of alignment. This was indeed a historical time that marked the beginning of an era in which prominent thinkers shifted away from industrialism, towards humanism and naturalism. Core philosophies for the child-centered curriculum can be found within these thinkers. "The romantics extolled imagination over reason, intense emotion over logic, and intuition over science" (Dunn, 2005).

The Father of Kindergarten and the Later Birth of Progressivism

Friedrich Froebel (Dunn, 2005) supported the use of the classroom environment as an extension of the teacher's influence. Much of environmental influence and its use as a "tool" dissipates as children mature through the elementary grades, as subject matter becomes more and more defined and separated into disciplines. According to a recent article written by William H. Jeynes (2006), entitled "Standardized tests and Froebel's Original Kindergarten Model" calls for a return to Froebel's play and family involvement in kindergarten. Jeynes writes about how testing in kindergarten has taken precedence over moral education and developing personality as it once were. Child development research since Froebel has suggested that his ideas of supporting a foundational approach to kindergarten benefits the development of young children better than one focused on high-stakes testing (Jeynes, 2006).

The child-centered approach to learning resulted from a response to learning and education that was being stifled by rote memory and rigidity; a response by those in education who became attuned to the individual learning styles of children. Furthermore, the sequential framework of learning experiences stems from the thoughts of John

Dewey. Known as the father of progressive education, Dewey's book entitled, "Experience and Education" (1938) is pivotal in American educative thought and theory.

Dewey (1938) focused his writing around the idea that experiences lend to the acquisition of knowledge. Furthermore, an applicable framework is essential in making meaning out of experience. Dewey writes that, "Again, experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another. Energy is then dissipated and a person becomes scatterbrained" (p.20). According to Dewey, the lacking continuity in educative experiences inhibits the ability to retain information. His writing reiterates the absolutely essential component to the success of reform efforts being supported by a clearly communicated purpose for education.

The views expressed by Dewey (1938), regarding the disparities between traditional and progressive views, expand upon the importance of external school factors that, while a component of education, remain outside of the school grounds and contribute to the need for strengthening school systems and practices. The simple disconnect between the home and what he terms, "patterns of organization" within the education system, point to an underlying issue and valuable facet in improving schools. What Dewey points out here is that the amount of coherency between home and school are stark in terms of operations, expectations, and structure. Accounting for the variance between home and school expectations, requires an understanding of culture.

Multi-cultural Considerations

Studies involving the importance of incorporating culturally-responsive educational practices have influenced approaches in the field of early childhood.

Preschool may be the first time children from diverse backgrounds encounter dominant culture expectations and societal norms; these includes direct eye contact, raising hands to speak, and assertion of needs and wants (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2010).

A resource handbook published by the Office of Head Start (OHS) called *Multicultural Principles* (2008) was written to address the growing need for professionals in the early learning field to aid in guiding interaction with growing diversity. This handbook was initially set forth in 1991, and has since been revisited to align with current research. This document displays Head Start's commitment to accommodate the changing needs of growing diversity within our communities.

The 1991 information memorandum is cited in the updated *Multicultural Principles for Head Start* (2008) and states that "Effective Head Start programming requires understanding, respect, and responsiveness to the cultures of all people, but particularly to those of enrolled children and families" (p. 3).

The OHS *Multicultural Principles* handbook recognizes the variety in definitions of the word "culture". As such OHS has opted to gather various definitions and present them as a reflective discussion point for Head Start program staff. The first principle demonstrates the importance of the acquisition of culture beginning at birth and continuing through the life span (2008). "Culture is acquired through the repeated, daily interactions children have with the people around them while growing up" (p.11) Key implications laid out in the document recognize this aspect of culture by considering that as children develop they demonstrate the ability to acquire sets of social rules and expectations; these rules for how to interact and relate with family members can be expressed both verbally and non- verbally.

Not only is “culture closely involved in how children develop and learn” (Multicultural Principles, 2007, p. 21) but was also signed into law by President George W. Bush on December 12, 2007 as the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act (p. 6). Part of the Act specifically called for Head Start agencies to “assist children with progress towards acquisition of English while making meaningful progress in attaining the knowledge, skills and development across the domains of the child development framework, including progress made through the use of culturally and linguistically appropriate instructional services” (p. 6).

Multicultural Expectations Framed in Experience

Early education and the primary grades must be responsive toward ensuring that learning is framed within lives of the students’ experiences. Dewey (1938) writes that, “It is his business (the educator’s) to arrange for the kind of experiences which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences” (p.21). This is the basis for effective approaches in education which must be constructed with the intent of the application of skills students learn. An applicable framework is essential in making meaning out of experience. Dewey (1938) writes that, “Again, experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another. Energy is then dissipated and a person becomes scatterbrained” (p.20). Without some sort of continuity in educative experiences the ability to retain information may be futile. It is in the utmost interest for educators to seek out continuity in the learning experiences of their students as they progress through grade levels and among subject matter, in order to build critical thinking

skills. Students must be given the opportunity to access information through positive and effective experiences. So much more important is the need for a school system to be cognizant of a larger purpose for which its students are a part of. This calls for a clearly articulated philosophy of education and experience supported by both administration and teachers alike.

An education system built upon the premise of developing a progressive theory of improvement must attach itself to a clear set of beliefs in an articulated plan towards alignment. And to further support such a system, sustainability is maintained by clearly defined standards managed through a transparent framework; a means through which school systems are propelled by a common understanding of the outcomes in education.

A Balanced Approach

E.D. Hirsch, while a direct opponent to the naturalistic progressive approach to education, includes a vision of equalizing education from a traditional point of view with a special interest in the early grades. He writes about the need for vertical alignment to come about by agreement of what should be mastered at each grade level (Dunn, 2005). According to Dunn, Hirsch argued that progressive education actually promoted division among students. He believed that children who came from families living in poverty were at a disadvantage because they do not bring with them background knowledge that children from well-educated parents come with. Taking into account the background knowledge students bring with them from home experiences, is a logical argument in favor of high quality accessible preschool education. "This is the primary reason for advocating the teaching of accepted knowledge rather than the constructing of personal meaning" (Dunn, 2010, p. 225).

Although opponents of the progressive approach to education seemed to criticize its lack of continuity and structure, according to Hirsch, learning at early ages simply occurs through play (Dunn, 2010). It is clear that without vehicles and resources through which to channel planning and collaboration with, efforts in alignment are futile. Furthermore, various modes of communication should allow for teachers who are seeking to promote strong literacy skills in the early grades, to allow for a collaborative approach to development. The development of a tool that can be used in such a way will allow for professionals in the early learning arena and the K-3 system to communicate effectively. In order to meet the expectations of Hirsch's alignment, professionals will then need to focus on consistency in the developmental expectations as outlined within the state's grade level expectations.

To support equal education opportunities for all students, systems and methods of meeting the needs of our students must be balanced. Efforts in tracking student's current abilities and further providing information of their progression in developmental learning, to include common tools and verbiage in which to assess our students and a common set of standards. Education reform can incorporate clear alignment of grade-level standards and expectation while at the same time utilizing a child-centered approach that is supported by developmentally appropriate practices. To come to agreement of what is developmentally appropriate, according to the National Association of Educating Young Children, "The core of developmentally appropriate practice lies in [this] intentionality, in the knowledge that practitioners consider when they are making decisions, and in their always aiming for goals that are both challenging and achievable for children" (NAEYC, 2009).

Examples from Sweden

In order to draw together the aforementioned subjects in a relevant manner as pertains to the focus of this thesis project, a look into current programs implementing aligned education systems spanning preschool through third grade is necessary. Sweden's move toward integration of formal schooling and preschools is no new venture.

According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2002) Soo-Hyang Choi, the Chief Section for Early Childhood and Inclusive Education UNESCO-Paris, released a policy brief entitled, "Integrating Early Childhood Into Education: The Case of Sweden." In the late ninety's Sweden's government responsibility for Childcare was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs over to the Ministry of Education and Science. This meant that the first tier of Pre-school served 1-5 year-olds with its own national curriculum and 6-year-olds were part of the compulsory school system. According to Choi's report, the government also opened up enrollment into pre-school for all children regardless of family income and employment status. Although, as the article indicates there were fears that preschool, "would become formalized...and that preschool pedagogy would lose its emphasis on play, children's natural learning strategies and their holistic development." As a result the article highlights that primary schools have actually been shown to be more "preschool-like" by incorporating holistic approaches to student learning (Choi, 2002).

Choi considers that in the past soft skills, such as behavioral, emotional, social and health issues, were put on secondary or tertiary status to that of academics. The article states that "nowadays, teachers have begun to talk about students' developmental status and progress as well as their academic achievements and increasingly see the need

of cooperating with parents more closely (p. 5).” Sweden’s pedagogical practices took on more of the preschool approach to learning as primary schools became transformed by shifting its focus from *teaching* to *learning*. The Swedish reform in early education proves that efforts in bridging the gap in and among the early years has the potential to bring about a paradigm shift in education, in which care, development, and learning will no longer be foreign concepts alongside education (Choi, 2002).

Besides the possibility of a shared approach to children’s learning and development, Choi writes that “the Swedish reform of childcare challenges us to go beyond early childhood and develop a new, holistic approach to working with children that will embrace their development and learning...in which early childhood is an integral indispensable part” (p. 10). More importantly Sweden’s decision to implement preschool on a national level supported by a common curriculum, shows that the fear of merging two historically separate entities is in fact feasible.

Possibilities in the U.S.

In comparison, the price tag in the United States to fund high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds would require roughly \$30 billion in government funding. This is only one percent of total government spending (Barnet, Brown, & Shore, 2004). An example of one state pulling resources and funding together to create quality early learning systems, is the state of New Jersey.

New Jersey is among the leading states in the nation that has over the last 20 years developed, and innovatively sustained a pre-K approach as a model for other states to follow. In 1998 a Supreme Court ruling ordered the state of New Jersey to provide high-quality pre-kindergarten programs to all 3-and 4-year-old children in the state’s highest

poverty districts, known as *Abbot* districts after the long *Abbot v. Burk* school finance case (Mead, 2009). A string of policy and innovative funding streams resulted, making New Jersey one of the nation's top leaders in early education reform.

Mead reports on the Elizabeth school district which serves 3,100 of its 3-and 4-year-olds in multiple settings ranging from elementary schools, nine community-based providers, and even three dual-language immersion centers, all which use a common curriculum called HighScope (Mead, 2009). In addition, the district commenced a partnership with the state Department of Education to focus on furthering the knowledge and skills of teachers in specific literacy development. Reading experts from the Department of Education provided extensive researched-based information about how children learn to read, as well as skills in working with bilingual and special needs students. The essential partnerships in the school district span state level, local school districts, and community partnerships. The ability to bridge the early learning field is contingent on partnerships such as these.

Another example in of innovative community partnerships within Mead's report is in New Jersey, that uses a blend of local and state funding is between the Red Bank school district and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) preschool programs. Nearly half of the children entering Red Bank schools are English language learners (Mead, 2009). District staff have invested heavily in constructing alignment and collaboration between both school-based programs and the YMCA. They utilized the same curriculum, going on the same field trips, and most importantly teachers received the same professional development. Moreover, the transition from preschool to kindergarten specifically introduces children to similar developmental play at the

beginning of the kindergarten year, then slowly incorporating more academic centers by the end of the year to match that of elementary grade classrooms (Mead, 2009).

Additional program elements include an emphasized balanced literacy and learning center approach, common planning times for data analysis and lesson co-planning for teachers in grades preK-3rd grade (Mead, 2006). The result is that 91% of Red Bank 4th graders are right on grade level in math, trumping the statewide average by 14 percentage points as per the New Jersey Assessment of Knowledge and Skills; reading scores show that 77% of the district's 4th graders are proficient, just approaching the state wide average despite the district's high percentage of English language learners (Mead, 2006). This is compelling evidence that partnerships with community-based providers who come along with unique resources, and school districts that bring organization and standards, together are a powerful force in affecting student outcomes. Much can be gleaned from the past decade of reform in the state of New Jersey.

P-3 Alignment

Recommendations from Mead's report are: focusing on literacy and use of data to inform instruction through well-aligned pedagogy in the early years, the inclusion of both public schools and community-based preschool and child care providers-to require a great deal of systemic support for both school districts and providers, and observational measures to track and drive improvement in quality of instruction (Mead, 2006).

According to a policy brief published by the Education Commission of the States (ECS, 2010), "The most effective transition efforts will be unsuccessful unless inconsistencies and unaligned expectations, curricula, assessments, and instructional practices across and within the two learning systems are addressed and improved." (p. 4).

The briefing informs the reader of the recommendations for creating a coordinated system, as well as a quick look at what states across the country are implementing in the P-3 approach.

Program level strategies for transition included on this report (ECS, 2010) are the “use of common forms across multiple programs and schools, the creation of transition teams and/or liaisons in districts and schools, joint professional development for both early educators and early grades teachers, shared data and common data points across systems, and transition planning as part of the school improvement process” (p. 4) Supports such as these assure continuity across systems as families navigate the public school system. Furthermore, the importance of transition is referred to in the briefing as one of the most critical transition times for children.

The aspect of alignment as identified in the report (ECS, 2010) include system consistencies that include elements such as standards, teachers who are well trained to understand child development, classroom experience to include curriculum and instruction, and valid assessments. Both vertical alignment- in which the progressive nature of learning is built upon each year, and horizontal alignment- in which consistency is maintained throughout a single grade-level, are mentioned in the briefing. Not only are schools reporting higher scores on state performance measures when an aligned system is in place, but the aligned approach must include areas of social, emotional, physical, and cognitive (ECS 2010). Moreover, “Aligned approaches require high quality experiences that are matched to the developmental abilities of individual children” (p. 6).

Transition & Alignment in the U.S.

The Education Commission of the States includes a few examples of states who

are creatively using multiple sources of funding to braid monies and support and improve transitions and alignment across early learning and the early elementary grades.

Ohio state created a resource guide that provides goals and detailed suggestions for ways schools can help to support families through transitions (ECS, 2010). Also, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg foundation Ohio began an initiative entitled Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK), focused on strengthening readiness before school and after children are already in the school system.

New Mexico is also cited in this briefing (ECS, 2010) as Joining Hands is the name of the state's framework for effective transitions to elementary school. Teams made up of early education teachers, parents, and community members who worked together to establish transition plans. The innovative use of flexible Title I funds, state and federal support for rural education, have helped support this program.

Arizona has a comprehensive set of early learning standards for children age three to five, as mentioned here (ECS, 2010). The early learning document is fully aligned with the state's kindergarten standards and provides a connection between early learning expectations and school readiness.

Pennsylvania has gone as far as to develop comprehensive learning standards for infants/toddlers, preschool, kindergarten and 1st and 2nd grades. As the first state to undertake a comprehensive alignment, efforts have been focused on both horizontal and vertical alignment practices as well as the addition of state created assessment tools that measure achievement as students move into and through elementary school.

Finally, Washington's Statewide Early Learning Plan (ELP) is cited here (ECS, 2010) calling for aligned pre-kindergarten and K-3 instructional practices. Washington's

ELP encompasses birth to grade three curricula and assessment processes that are “developmentally and culturally appropriate” (p. 8).

Washington State’s Early learning

Very recently the Obama administration’s answer to growing challenges in the public school system, allotted funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to competitive grants called the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge. \$500 million dollars were to be spread out to states who are leading the way in ambitious yet achievable plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform (RTT-ELC, 2011).

Among the criteria for states who applied to this grant are, design integrated and transparent systems to provide alignment between early care and education programs, increase the training and support for early learning professionals, create comprehensive evaluation systems to document and share effective practices, and assist parents to make informed decisions about care for their children. Out of the 35 applicants, the state of Washington has been elected as a recipient for \$60 million.

A key component in contributing to the state’s recent acquisition of RTT-ELC funds is the development of Washington State’s Early Learning Guidelines (2011). The importance of standards in an accountability-based education climate is essential in providing a framework through which education systems can guide their work.

Existing State-Wide Partnerships

Established partnerships between the early learning community and school districts in the state of Washington the project will serve as a platform in establishing the purpose of this project. Existing partnerships in the field of early learning include those

associated or funded by a combination of the Washington State Department of Early Learning, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Thrive by Five. In 2009, Thrive by Five CEO- Nina Auerbach, State Superintendent- Randy Dorn, and the Director of the Department of Early Learning- Betty Hyde, signed a joint resolution stating how the different entities would be working together to implement Washington's Early Learning Plan (ELP). The backbone of this project stems from the recommendations and strategies listed in the ELP.

Washington State's Early Learning Plan

The state Department of Early Learning (DEL) published a summary of the application requirements and how Washington was able to secure the grant. Among required components of the application were "Successful state systems that include: an aligned and coordinated system (DEL, 2012)." In order to demonstrate these, the state included a number of policies and documents supporting this requirement, among which was the Early Learning Plan (ELP). The ELP is a ten-year plan that outlines Washington state's roadmap for building an early childhood system that will improve outcomes for children in school and in life.

Finalized in September of 2011, the ELP after over a year of planning and input from stakeholders across Washington state, was formed to provide guidance in early learning policy, with the overarching goal of constructing a statewide system that supports school readiness for children ages birth through grade three. The plan is mandated in the legislation that created the Department of Early Learning (DEL) in 2006. Specifically noted in the law, state entities are "to develop a statewide early learning plan that crosses systems and sectors to promote alignment of private and public sector

actions, objectives, and resources, and to ensure school readiness” (RCW 42.215.090).

With this mandate DEL, OPSI, and Thrive by Five created Washington’s Early Learning Plan.

The plan is organized into a “Ready and Successful” framework set over a period of the next ten years in which collaborations across the state and within districts will align comprehensive approaches to school readiness. The 272 page document begins by articulating the work completed in order to develop the plan. The variety of participants highlights the wide-range of stakeholders invested in early learning as well as the range of feedback and input from differing fields, to inform the creation of this plan. Section V entitled, “Outcomes and strategies for Readiness and Early School Success” are based on the recommendations of the joint resolution and the National Education Goals Panel’s definition of school readiness set forth in 1998.

As indicated in the vision statement below, the success of a plan as comprehensive as this, must include a clear statement for the purpose of focusing work.

In Washington, we work together so that all children start life with a solid foundation for success, based on strong families and a world-class early learning system for all children prenatal through third grade. Accessible, accountable, and developmentally and culturally appropriate, our system partners with families to ensure that every child is healthy, capable and confident in school and in life. (pp. 69)

Section five of the ELP details “outcomes” which are primarily broad statements that describe improvements for the future, and “strategies” specifying ideas for how to go

about achieving the outcomes. For the purposes of this project the outcomes listed under Ready and Successful School are (a) all children and families make smooth transitions among home, early learning settings and school; (b) all schools are ready to welcome all children who attend, including preparing for their individual gifts and needs, level of knowledge, skills, social-emotional and physical development, and their cultural background and language; and (c) all students transition from third grade-level activities prepared with the foundations to achieve the more advanced challenges of upper elementary and intermediate grade-level activities (pp. 119). Also, listed under these outcomes are four strategies that include (a) strategy #26 Social-emotional learning, (b) strategy #27 Aligned prekindergarten and K-3 instructional and programmatic practices, (c) strategy #28 Kindergarten readiness assessment, and (d) strategy #29 Full-day kindergarten (pp. 119-124).

Foundation of the ELP

Prior to the development of the ELP, Washington Legislature passed Senate Bill 5841 in 2005, which provided funds for three K-3 demonstration projects. This was passed in response to an earlier report, *Washington Learns 2005*, which made recommendations to all levels of education; of which one proposed recommendation included reform to the philosophy and structure through third grade. (Kelly & Seaton, 2009). Three project schools were to incorporate structural components such as full-day kindergarten, 1 teacher to 18 students, part-time instructional coach and specific professional development; in addition to incorporating dimensions supporting an educational philosophy of child-centered learning, learning experiences through exploration, varied subject matter, and assessment to include mastery of skills in reading

and math before promotion into the upper elementary grades (Kelly & Seaton, 2009). Measured results from this project included an increase in the number of students either meeting or exceeding standards from the beginning to the end of the year, and an increase in reading scores at two out of the three sites. “All three project sites reported that these gains were attributable to professional development, partnerships, and birth through third grade alignment” (p. 58). During the first year teacher focus group sessions met around issues concerning teachers’ satisfaction with the academic and social/emotional progress of their students. Teachers’ perceptions of the K-3 project were working best, accomplishments, challenges, and changes they would like to see for year two, were also specific feedback comments garnered from the participants (p. 9).

Alignment in prekindergarten and K-3 instructional and programmatic practices calls for a clear definition. Because there are currently no regulatory definitions for a P-3 system this type of alignment and transition between the grades can mean different things for different districts; with many districts in different stages of implementation of this type of collaboration. Among recommended steps to be taken in order to achieve this outcome are to (a) encourage communication and collaboration among professionals working with children of different ages, and efforts to combine the whole-child approach birth through age 5 years care with the K-12 emphasis on academic knowledge and practices; and (b) increase early childhood/early elementary program collaboration and teacher effectiveness at a district level through a focus on the development of critical early learning skills, using aligned standards, curricula and assessment preK through 3rd grade (ELP, pp. 120). As this serves for the platform of the project, additional tools to facilitate the alignment of practices and standards will be based on the Washington State

Early Learning and Development Guidelines and the Common Core Standards, available in the appendix.

The Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines serve the purpose of informing the professionals in early learning as to how typically developing children grow and learn. These guidelines aspire to encourage dialogue and sharing, inform professional development, incorporate culturally inclusive research of child development and practices, and develop the relationships between early learning and the K-12 community. This additional resource will serve as supplemental information as focus groups make considerations for alignment of practices and plan for increased collaboration.

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated various aspects for providing a comprehensive background to the significance of the first years of life. Historical foundations of the child centered curriculum, multicultural considerations, the evolving movement toward focusing on the early grades as a catalyst for high school graduation rates, and finally the recent developments in the state of Washington, are outlined within this chapter.

Incorporating these aspects of early learning in such a fashion further supports the importance of the developing child in his formative years, as a foundation for success in school and in life.

CHAPTER III

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

A P-3 network is evolving and gathering momentum in Washington which among these efforts are multiple demonstration projects funded by the legislature (Kelly & Seaton, 2009), such as the Early Learning Leadership Grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Project Procedure

The project is in the form of a facilitator's guide for collaborative meeting involving early learning professionals and kindergarten- 3rd grade teachers. The appointed facilitator should be someone in a position to lead school district K-3 grade teachers, as well as a person who can provide leadership to community members in the early learning field. Naturally, the building principal is an ideal candidate, however a vice-principal or appointed administrative coordinator are appropriate as well.

Project Development

The formation of the guidebook takes into account the various pieces of research aforementioned. Taking into consideration the strategies outlined in the Early Learning Plan, this project strives to support the stated outcomes listed for Ready and Successful Schools (a) all children and families make smooth transitions among home, early learning settings and school; (b) all schools are ready to welcome all children who attend, including preparing for their individual gifts and needs, level of knowledge, skills, social-emotional and physical development, and their cultural background and language; and (c) all students transition from third grade-level activities prepared with the foundations to achieve the more advanced challenges of upper elementary and intermediate grade-level

activities, by developing a tool for strategy #27, aligned prekindergarten and K-3 instructional practices.

Project Implementation

Because this project is designed as a tool for use specifically by Washington State schools seeking to begin alignment of these practices, the main documents supporting the goal of the project is the state's Early Learning Plan, the Common Core Standards, Washington State's Early Learning Guidelines, and Teaching Strategies Gold Objectives for Teaching and Learning, all found in the appendix. The procedure of the project begins by first developing relationships and conversations with private agencies and early learning professionals, and school district teachers. The progression of these meetings then move toward more detailed agendas as the partnership progresses.

CHAPTER IV

The facilitator's guide entitled, "Bridging the Gap: School Readiness and P-3 Alignment," will include meeting agendas and materials for schools to begin partnering with early learning community agencies, and begin alignment of P-3 practices. The agendas will include a total of twelve meetings, organized into three series of four sessions. Handouts, power-point, and supplemental resources will be digitally included on a CD in the front of the guidebook.

The structure of the collaboration is broken into three series, consisting of four sessions each, for a total of 12 meetings. The first series of meeting should be advertised and conducted in the winter. These sessions introduce the teachers to one another and are intended to develop professional relationships and further cultivate a collaborative approach to education. These first meetings are meant to be carefully planned and executed well, as the amount of participation from teachers will determine the success of these meetings.

The next set of meetings should occur during the middle to end of spring. This is because the final meeting within this series, is a planning session for next fall. These middle sessions are intended to deepen the knowledge and skills of teachers in regard to PreK-3rd grade alignment, in conjunction with the Common Core Standards and the Early Learning Guidelines. These middle set of sessions are also the "work" sessions, as teachers are asked to discuss how their practices and curricula align vertically, and match the Common Core Standards or Early Learning Guidelines.

The final set of meetings should be planned for the beginning of the year. The first meeting in this session is can be conducted up to four weeks before the first day of

school, in order to provide adequate planning time to occur for transferring records and discussion on how to meet with parents before the onset of school. And the session directly following will take place after the beginning of the school year about three of four weeks in.

Much of the rest of the meetings in this final series is spent in the reflective process. Teachers are encouraged to think about how the process of collaboration was presented to them and how they think it can be improved. The teachers are also encouraged to make plans for sustaining the task force in the next year. This component of the final meetings is essential in determining where the task force is projecting to arrive by the end of the year.

As the meetings are set up sequentially there is really no good place to end, thus the final meetings are specific to the future of the team and in what capacity participants' envision for the continuation of the collaboration.

A power point presentation is included for only the first meeting. The information presented will allow for the team to get adjusted to each other, and provide pertinent information on the state of early learning collaboration in the state.

All handouts will be digitally copied onto the compact disc containing the power point presentation, located on the inside sleeve of the guidebook. A hard copy of the handout will also be included in the guidebook, along with the corresponding agenda.

The agenda's provided in the guidebook are meant for use of the participating teachers and are included in the digital copy, as well. Along with these agendas are facilitator notes directly following the guidebook format, these have been included as tips for keeping discussions focused and directing the attention of the facilitator to the

objectives for each meeting.

The final pages of the guidebook will include a hard copy of the resources for ease of use to the facilitator. These will include a copy of the Early Learning Plan, the Common Core Standards (K-3), Illinois State Standards for Social Emotional Development, and the Teaching Strategies Gold Objectives for Learning and Development.

CHAPTER V

Summary

As the implementation of the Early Learning Plan come into effect this next year, public and private relationships will commence and continue to strengthen. With the acquisition of RTT-ELC, Washington state will help lead the nation in an effort to unite and develop its early learning system with the support of additional federal dollars. The tool outlined here is hoped to be utilized by organizations seeking to develop an alignment strategy that is inclusive and research-based. As districts begin to open their instructional practices toward alignment in the early grades, to include preschool, Washington state's Early Learning Plan will serve as a solid foundation by which these partnerships can focus their work.

Conclusions

There are positive implications for a strong prek-3rd alignment system, beginning with quality preschool experiences and extending through the third grade as indicated in the research discussed. Although, as Washington state moves forward with the Early Learning Guidelines (ELG), careful consideration to ensure ELGs are not too narrow as to contradict what research indicates is important to child development.

Further research and effective support should be considered when making decisions of how to assess young children, specifically including information for clearly defining the purpose and use of results (Daily, Burkauser, & Halle, 2010)

Research of the effects of third grade reading skills coupled with poverty, has an influence of high school graduation rates. One in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time, at a rate that is four

time greater than that of students who are proficient (Hernandez, 2011). Further support for how teachers can address this issue by working together and developing relationships with community resources is needed to help alleviate the complex issues related to poverty.

Implications

The use of this guidebook and accompanying research is meant for use by a school or community leader who is connected to both the local school district and with non-profit or private agencies offering early education services. The facilitation of these teacher focus group meetings will enable partnerships to develop between two traditionally separate entities, as well as grant opportunities for K-3 teachers to begin discussions for alignment of best practices and future professional development.

Recommendations

Further support must be advocated for by teachers, building staff, administrators, and policy makers. Without which the efforts of the state and the ideas behind alignment in the early grades will not be brought into fruition. Continued efforts to assemble the field of early learning into a system that is comprehensive and complimentary to the K-12 system, calls for a paradigm shift in how society values the efforts in the education of children birth to age eight.

Quality measurements in these early grades should not allow for formalized testing to indicate program efficacy, rather researched based assessment rubrics such as the CLASS tool from the University of Virginia, which measure teacher-child interaction, should be considered when evaluations and professional development is planned to boost teacher skills and performance.

Furthermore, as the ten year Early Learning Plan forges on, research and documentation of Washington State's efforts require careful recording by which to inform our practices in the next ten years.

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APPENDIX

Bridging the Gap

School Readiness and P-3 Alignment

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Introduction

School districts wishing to begin coordination between preschool staff and k-3 staff should make use of this guidebook. The purpose of this handbook is to provide a template for organized meetings in which the main goal of the “focus group” is to approach school readiness and alignment in a collaborative manner. Therefore these meetings are organized in a sequential manner in which participants move through the content together, with the goal of setting a foundation for which to build school readiness, transition, and vertical alignment through grades K-3.

Background Information & Research

Investments in early education produces both long term and short term economic benefits (Calman and Tarr-Whelan, 2005). Of the short-term benefits stated, are a more efficient work force due to the care provided for working mothers, and the purchase of goods and services. Also stated in the report were long-term benefits of quality early education building an employable and educated work force.

In addition, accruing research over the past 40 years has proven the benefits of quality early learning education to have a significant impact on the US economy. Three major long-term follow-up studies support the advantages of early education.

- Perry Preschool Project
- Carolina Abecedarian project
- Chicago Parent Centers

Cumulatively spanning four decades of research and follow-up analyses, these programs evidence an economic return of up to \$13 to every \$1 invested in early education.

Noteworthy gains were attributable to savings in the reduction of incarceration, reduced remedial services in school, higher graduation rates, increased attendance to higher education, and higher salaries (Muennig et al, 2011) Children who participate in high-quality supportive preschool environments are less likely to require remedial attention throughout schooling, less likely to be involved in criminal activity, and are more likely to contribute to a higher percentage of tax payments due to salary increases, are at the crux of these studies. These trends, resulting from extensive longitudinal gathering of

data, have influenced the development and established the need for high quality early education.

P-3 Alignment in Washington State Alignment in prekindergarten and K-3 instructional and programmatic practices calls for a clear definition. Because there are currently no regulatory definitions for a P-3 system this type of alignment and transition between the grades can mean different things for different districts; with many districts in different stages of implementation of this type of collaboration.

Washington State Early Learning Plan 's recommended steps to be taken are to (a) encourage communication and collaboration among professionals working with children of different ages, and efforts to combine the whole-child approach birth through age 5 years care with the K-12 emphasis on academic knowledge and practices; and (b) increase early childhood/early elementary program collaboration and teacher effectiveness at a district level through a focus on the development of critical early learning skills, using aligned standards, curricula and assessment preK through 3rd grade (ELP, pp. 120).

WA KIDS 2014 will mark the year that the Washington's state-wide Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills will be a mandated for all kindergarten data collection and assessment. Conversation for kindergarten teachers on how to use assessment data from participating preschool programs, should be solicited during the middle part of the session series (2nd series). This is so that teachers can discuss transition activities along with consideration of how to transfer assessment data.

For more information regarding WA KIDS see official website

<http://www.k12.wa.us/WaKIDS/>

Building a Focus Group

Make the following considerations in preparation for forming your focus group. Initial contact with outside agencies such as private and federally or state-funded, preschool organizations as well as your local Early Learning Coalition will gain the school district access to preschool professionals.

-Select at least one strong teacher from each grade level who can serve as the grade level leader. This person can be appointed to serve as a central lead for disseminating information and gathering feedback.

-Group teachers from each grade band into teams so that only one person from each grade band is represented. Group these teachers according to classroom experience and expertise in endorsed areas, so that each group has a wide variety of skills and perspectives to offer. incentives unrelated to pay, such as the opportunity to progress in their professional career, and to work as a pilot program in the district. Encourage the possibility of taking the lessons learned from this time around and sharing the process with other schools. "Teach other to teach others.

Also, consider exploring the following community contacts:

<u>Organization-</u>	<u>Participants</u>	<u>Role & Responsibility</u>
Education Service Dist.	Title I Coordinator	Explore funding stream possibilities
	Literacy Specialist Math Coordinator	Professional Development Support/ Request for combined professional development from prek-3
Community Support/ Non-profit agencies	United Way Washington Alliance for Better Schools Childcare Resource & Referral Local Public Library	Contact to organize efforts around School Readiness (i.e. conduct a combined literacy fair, Kinder Registration, etc)

You are invited to participate on a

School District Alignment Team:

**Please join us for an informational meeting about the latest in PreK-3rd alignment
and our proposal for beginning this exciting new reform.**

{ Date / Time / Location }

How to use this guide:

This guide is intended for the use of school districts and early learning professionals conducting initial collaboration efforts.

Therefore these meetings are broken into three series, within each of these you will find four sessions.

The first of these series is intended to introduce participants to each other and form a common vision, and should occur during the middle part of the school year.

The second series of meetings focus on deepening the knowledge of participants pertaining to PreK-3rd practices and how relevant state and national standards, relate to the goals of vertical alignment. These set of meetings should occur during the spring, as the final meeting in the session is aimed for fall planning in the next school year.

The final series focuses on sustaining the group's vision through the reflective practice. This entails teachers giving feedback on various aspects of the collaborative process. The purpose of this is also ensure that future endeavors of the group remain progressive.

The following provides an overview of objectives for each session, also found at the top of each session agenda.

1. Welcome, vision, and planning: Focus these meetings on forming initial relationships, a clear goal for the group, and establishing background knowledge of current efforts in the state as well as soliciting solid “buy-in”.

Session 1-1 Establish group expectations and a common vision.

Session 1-2 Articulate and solidify goals for the group

Session 1-3 Build participants’ knowledge and awareness of social-emotional development.

Session 1-4 Compare the various methods for assessments, vertically through the grades.

2. Work sessions: The middle set of meetings will focus on the continuation of building and deepening the knowledge of participants around vertical PreK-3rd alignment.

Session 2-1 Examine Common Core Standards as related to grade-level curricula, vertically through the grades.

Session 2-2 Gain Knowledge and familiarity of the Early Learning Guidelines.

Session 2-3 Strategies for communicating and supporting parents as first teachers.

Session 2-4 Articulation for an action plan of alignment tasks in the upcoming next year.

3. *Practicing a partnership and sustaining vertical alignment* The final set will focus on planning and reflecting on beginning of the year transitions, and sustaining the efforts of the group thus far.

Session 3-1 Prepare for beginning of the year alignment tasks.

Session 3-2 Analyze beginning of the year alignment tasks.

Session 3-3 Engage participants in the reflective process to develop sustainable practices for the group.

Session 3-4 Generate new goals and share out feedback from surveys.

Session 1.1

Purpose To establish group dynamics and cooperation around a united front, and set the tone for work around a shared vision of P-3 alignment.

Outcome(s) Participants will “get to know” each other and establish a shared vision statement.

Materials/ Resources: Flip chart, Power point materials, 1a Handout- Meeting Itinerary, 1b Handout-optional use of Minutes form, and name tags.

Detailed Agenda:

- [30 min] Welcome & Introductions- Participants will engage in an ice breaker activity; choose one that reflects the amount of people present.
- Establish a note taker for minutes (optional use of handout 1b)
- Establish a shared “vision statement”.
- [20 min] Power point of State efforts- Engage and widen the picture of Early Learning in the state, specifically in P-3 work.
- National efforts and updates.
- Discussion and comments.
- [5 min] Closing and take-away. Handout itinerary for meetings.

Facilitator notes:

The main objective for the facilitator during this first meeting is to create an inviting environment that will promote collaboration and progressive momentum.

An important aspect of the success of productive meetings planned in succession, it is the aim for the facilitator to solicit “buy-in” from participants from the very beginning.

Being cognizant of your audience and the fact that early learning professionals may feel uncomfortable within the context of a school district setting, will help participants feel at ease. And vice versa, what sorts of preconceived notions do you think elementary staff may perceive of early learning professionals? The goal here is to “bridge this gap”, and eliminate any assumptions by providing the bigger picture of what kinds of early learning reform is taking place across the State and country.

As you go through the power point be sure to engage all participants and be sensitive to the learning styles of your interactive audience.

Session 1.2

Purpose To further build the relationships between K-3 staff and early learning professionals.

Outcome(s) Participants will be able to articulate specific goals pertaining to the group, and continue to develop meaningful professional relationships.

**Materials*

Article "A Paradigm Shift"

Detailed Agenda:

- [20 min] Welcome. Professional reading: "*A Paradigm Shift*"
- [30-45 min] Solidifying the vision
- Where and how do we begin?
 - How will we know what we are doing is working?
(establish time frame and goals)
- [20-25 min] Continued development of professional relationship.
Sharing activity- *Strengths and Learning Opportunities*.
- [5 min] Closing & take away. Details/ notes for next meeting.

Facilitator notes:

Professional readings: Inform participants that as professionals it is important to keep abreast on current findings and research. Part of our meetings will require the reading and discussion on current articles.

“Solidifying the vision” ask for participants to articulate some ah-ha’s from the last meeting. What did you learn about your role as an educator in Prek-3rd grade that you didn’t realize before? What do you think your role is now, and how does it relate to your partners in grades below and after yours?

Draw out this discussion and focus on gathering an idea of what participants would like to see improve?

Strengths and Learning Opportunities activity:

Materials: Sticky “dots” (used for labeling), and chart or regular-sized paper.

Prepare a graph on a chart piece of paper. If there are fewer than ten people you can pass a smaller piece of paper around the table.

- Label the horizontal line “knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice” and the vertical line “challenge for change”. Explain that the “challenge” refers to their perception for the level of difficulty in beginning new collaborative approaches to teaching and learning.

-Ask participants to place their dot at the place they feel best displays their ability.

After all have placed their dots, discuss the results and what it may indicate where the group should focus their energy.

Session 1.3

Purpose In order to approach classroom management as a unified front, participants will reflect and discuss current practices to gain a deeper understanding of social emotional development.

Outcome(s) Participants will produce statements for social emotional development for respective grades.

**Materials- Early Learning Guidelines, Illinois State Standards for Social-Emotional Development, Flip chart*

Detailed Agenda:

[10 min] Reflection activity: Ask how participants what they feel is the most demanding adjustment children make when coming into Kindergarten.

[15 min] Refer participants to the Washington State Early Learning Guidelines, as well as Illinois State Standards for Social-Emotional Development.

[15-20 min] Can we align our own practices? Focused practices that support the development of this domain?

[15-20 min] Social-Emotional statement starters

[5 min] Closing and take-away: Details/ notes for next meeting

**Reminder! Please bring examples of assessments and screenings.*

(i.e. Curriculum-Based Assessments in Reading, Developmental Screenings, Rubrics, Progress Monitoring, Observational & Authentic samples

Facilitator Notes:

The objective for the facilitator during this meeting is to deepen the understanding of how social-emotional development affects the development of children. Also in pairing the importance of family involvement, to gain a better picture of the whole child, is discussed here.

Illinois State Standards for Social-Emotional Development & the Early Learning

Guidelines: Provide groups with copies of these documents for their respective grades.

(Found on CD)

After viewing, solicit feedback from participants to think of broad statements for each grade band concerning what specific benchmarks are supported in their classrooms.

-“Students in my class will develop_____ by_____.”

-“by_____ (example of a routine: such as checking-in, turning in homework, weekly visits from school counselor to teach managing feelings, etc).

The next meeting will involve an examination of screenings and various assessments used by teachers. Please remind participants to come prepared.

Session 1.4

Purpose To discuss various assessments and the purposes they serve in an aligned system.

Outcome Participants will be able to articulate the uses of different types of assessment used in the early grades, and how these relate to an aligned approach to education.

**Materials:* *Curriculum-Based Assessments in Reading, Developmental Screenings Rubrics, Progress Monitoring, Observational, & Authentic samples*

Detailed Agenda:

[10 min] Opening & welcome.

[30 min] Assignment of groups for today's work: Create a group with at least one teacher in each grade level PreK-3rd.

[10-15 min] Groups present their discussions.

[5 min] Closing and take-away: Details/ notes for next meeting .

Remind participants to bring curricula and supplemental materials used for teaching reading.

Session 2.1

Purpose To gain an understanding of the new Common Core standards and how these standards will be met in the grade below and above participants' respective grade level.

Outcome(s) Using attached handout, participants will work with teachers prior to and following their respective grade band and be able to identify and articulate at least one specific standard in relation to curricula and/or supplemental materials utilized.

**Materials: Handout 2a Common Core Standards for Grade levels K-3*

Detailed Agenda-

- [10 min] Welcome and introduction. Recap last meeting and introduce Common Core Standards
- [30-40- min] Assemble into groups so that one teacher per grade band makes up each work group. Using the Common Core Standards, teachers will list and discuss curricula or teaching materials that meet the outcomes indicated on standards. Choose at least 2-3 standards to completely align.
- [10 min] Participants will share out their discussions.
- [5 min] Closing and take-away: Details/ notes for next meeting

2a

Vertical Alignment: Early Learning Guidelines – Common Core

Identified learning standard/ benchmark: _____

Pre-K	Kindergarten	1 st Grade	2 nd Grade	3 rd Grade
Methods/curricula/ supplemental materials:	Methods/curricula/ supplemental materials:	Methods/curricula/ supplemental materials:	Methods/curricula/ supplemental materials:	Methods/curricula/ supplemental materials:

Facilitator's Notes:

After examining the Early Learning Guidelines, participants will now take a look at the Common Core standards and begin the alignment process by choosing a few to focus on in their groups.

**Groupings can change accordingly, in order to increase communication among various participants and draw out individual strengths.*

Roam and provide scaffolding for participants to draw out discussion and discourse.

Session2.2

Purpose - This work session will allow participants to become familiar with the document: Washington's Early Learning Guidelines.

Outcome(s) - Participants will be able to locate information in the Early Learning Guidelines and clearly articulate how its information is relevant to their practice.

**Materials Article 2b. The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education*

Detailed Agenda:

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| [10 min] | Welcome: Overview of professional article reading 2b. <i>The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education.</i> |
| [30-45 min] | Working in groups, identify the main (4) components outlined in each developmental age range. |
| [20-25 min] | Group discussion on how these relate or compare to Common Core standards. |
| [5 min] | Closing/ take away. Details/ notes for next meeting. |

Facilitator's Notes:

Help participants get familiar with this document and understand the vocabulary. As participants become familiar with the lay-out and components, solicit discussion on how these relate or compare to the Common Core Standards.

Pull out notes taken on flip chart if necessary or available to help produce feedback.

Session 2.4

Purpose- In order to carry out original vision statement and progress towards meeting goals, participants will collectively plan for the future of the group.

Outcomes: Participants will discuss and create an agenda and outline for what they would like to accomplish, specific to alignment activities and professional development for the next school year.

Materials/ Resources- Flip Chart, Handout 2c and Personal Calendars

Detailed Agenda:

- [10 min] Recap on progress made thus far in planning
- [40-45 min] As an entire group plan specific alignment activities and document on *Action Items* (Handout 2c). Consider the following subjects-
 - Transitions between grades (grade promotion considerations?)
 - How often to meet once the school year gets going?
 - What to cover during those meetings? What factors to consider (i.e. time, implementation, participants, expectations, etc)?
 - Planning for the beginning of the year: Open house, transition, and family involvement?
- [5 min] Closing and take-away: Plan for next meeting

2c

An Action Plan for future projects:

Items to be discussed

By Whom?

By When?

Items to be discussed	By Whom?	By When?

Facilitator's Notes:

Conduct this final meeting in the current school year as a "kick-off" to what lies ahead in the fall.

By engaging participants in exercising control over what outcomes they would like to see out of this task force, the likelihood of achieving these goals may increase.

Continue to solicit feedback and collect notes on the Action Items handout.

Session 2.3

Purpose In order for participants to create an awareness of the importance of parent involvement, this meeting will serve as a catalyst for disseminating resources for participants to refer parents and families, when seeking additional help.

Outcomes Participants will be challenged to take on a project in the next month to promote parent involvement. (i.e. Parent Resource Center, Literacy Night, Fundraiser, Book Fair, et.)

**Materials-*

Flip Chart

Article 2c "How Do Parents Matter?"

Detailed Agenda-

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| [10 min] | Welcome: Overview of professional reading, "How Do Parents Matter?" |
| [25 min] | Schools as Hubs- An opportunity to get parents familiar with programs in the community. |
| [25-30 min] | Planning session and brainstorming activity: Think of an event to sponsor that will solicit the involvement of our parents and community members. |
| [5 min] | Closing and take-away. Details/ notes for next meeting. |

Facilitators notes:

Schools as Hubs:

Invite a guest speaker from a community agency that works with families. Some schools have access to a Family Resource Advocate or Coordinator. Invite this person to share about various resources available to parents.

Allow time for participants to come up with an idea to involve parents in their children's education. As the facilitator, help the group come up with ideas and get their buy-in by making suggestions as necessary. Allow natural leaders in the group take charge of the event and offer support and guidance as needed.

Session 3.1

Purpose In order to provide sufficient planning time for teachers and staff to carry-out action items from last session, this meeting will occur 4 weeks prior to the first day of school.

Outcomes Participants will decide on specific transition activities for the beginning of the year and how to conduct parent meetings to include a group approach to transitioning students identified as having concerns.

**Materials/ Resources-Handout #3-a*

Detailed Agenda:

- [10 min] Welcome Back! & Refresher of focus group goals.
- [35-40 min] Review of Action Items from previous meeting, specific to beginning of year activities. Parent-teacher meetings before school begins, transfer of information, etc.
- [10-15 min] Mini-task forces will plan, share-out, and solicit feedback and from participants.
- [5 min] Closing and take-away: Details/notes for next meeting.

3a

Transition Plans for beginning of year:

*Use this planning sheet to brainstorm and discuss possibilities for aligning the transfer of student records and communicating progress of students through the grade levels.

By Whom? By When?

Plans for transfer of academic records:

Plans for meeting with parents and students:

Plans for addressing students with special concerns and/or monitoring:

*Determine what types of documents to provide when identifying concerns, how often to meet, etc.

Facilitator's Notes:

This will be a working meeting in which groups will be jointly planning their efforts according to the action plans created at the last meeting.

These will also reflect what the intents for the group are this next year.

Allow for the majority of this time to be spent drafting flyers, what transition will entail (before school conferences w/ parents or w/ other teachers), and identifying whether additional help is needed.

Be sure that groups take notes and communicate through email.

Session3.2

Purpose To reflect on how transition went; up and down the grade levels.

Outcome(s) Participants will make recommendations for transition practices at the beginning and end of school year.

**Materials/ Resources:*

Flipchart

Detailed Agenda:

[10 min] Welcome!

[25-35 min] Transition reflection. Solicit discussion on the following topics:

- What information did you receive from previous teacher(s)?
- What information did you receive from parents?
- How would you have done this differently? How to improve this next year?

[15-20 min] Open house planning- include specific activities to involve parents and attract parent education opportunities.

[5 min] Closing and take-away: Plan for next meeting

Session 3.3

Purpose In order to improve alignment practices, participants will be offered a chance to reflect on the process thus far, in order to create new goals and continued work.

Outcomes Participants will identify professional development goals.

**Materials/ Resources: P-3 Reflection Handout #3b*

Detailed Agenda:

- [10 min] Welcome and debrief for upcoming session meeting

- [10 min] Self-reflection piece and sharing.
- [20 min] Discussion around reflection and feedback questions.
 Ways for improving structure of meetings.
 Where were our strengths?
 Where are our opportunities for growth?
- [25 min] Take a second look at our graph. With a different colored dot, place yourself now.
 Looking forward.
- [5 min] Closing and take-away: Plan for next meeting

**Reminder: Please bring a dish for a classic-style potluck next meeting.*

Facilitator's Notes:

Facilitator should aim to use this time for honesty in soliciting feedback for the purpose of ensuring that the future of the group remains productive and useful for teachers.

Keep this final discussion focused to soliciting feedback that can be used to solve issues that arise. Recognize the statement from the participant then pose the question to the group to help problem-solve.

**Optional use of handout 3b-make use of the final survey to gather feedback from participants in a different forum and allowing others to communicate freely. Gather these and save to final meeting.*

Session3.4

Purpose- Participants will generate future goals for the focus group as well as action items and delegated personnel for who will accomplish them.

Outcome- Group feedback will inform future goals.

**Materials-*

Potluck items

Agenda:

[20-25 min] Group reflection of the entire series: How helpful was the discussion and planning? How can we continue this work?

[25-30 min] Generate feedback from participants and discuss future goals for the focus group.

Based on these goals choose a few to develop action plans and delegate task force groups to accomplish or begin the next leg of work.

[10 min] Closing and thank the participants.